

Research Program

FORM OF THE BODY OR GHOST IN THE MACHINE?

The Study Of Soul, Mind And Body (1250–1700)

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Philosophy of mind, the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of mental phenomena and their relation to physical phenomena, is unquestionably one of the most flourishing disciplines within contemporary philosophy. The flow of publications on issues such as consciousness, sensation, perception, concept formation, reasoning, intention, personal identity, and memory seems unstoppable. The rapid development of this field of philosophy is considerable, not least because of its affiliation with disciplines such as neurobiology, cognitive science and computer science. Just like these technical brain sciences, today's philosophy of mind pays, however, little attention to its own history, although it makes ample use of previous models of explaining mind–body relations, Cartesian dualism serving as the preferred example. Only recently have scholars begun to investigate the historical background of current debates in the field of the philosophy of mind, paying particular attention to the mind–body problem, which originated in medieval and early modern philosophical controversies on the relation between the soul and the body. It is to this nascent and very fascinating trend of scholarship that the present research program wishes to make a substantial contribution.

Historically speaking, the starting point of today's controversies was Aristotle's theory of the soul. According to Aristotle, "soul" (*psuchê*, *anima*) is the principle that accounts for the distinction between what is alive and what is dead. More accurately, it is the principle that governs the various vital functions that characterize living bodies, such as nutrition, locomotion, perception and thought.

In Aristotle's view, souls are not immaterial, spiritual entities caught, as it were, in material, bodily containers, but rather sets of powers that make bodies live and function. Following this view, epitomized in the celebrated dictum according to which the soul is the "form of the body," the problem of the union and interaction of soul and body does not even arise. For the different vital powers are precisely functions of the body itself. Moreover, in Aristotle's view, there is no radical distinction between vegetative, sensitive and motive powers, on the one hand, and intellectual functions, on the other (in other words, there is no radical distinction between soul and mind). On the contrary, Aristotle arranged the different kinds of functions hierarchically, attributing only vegetative powers to plant souls; vegetative, sensitive and motive powers to animal souls; and, in addition to these, the power of thought to human souls. Correspondingly, from an Aristotelian perspective, the science of the soul (*scientia de anima*) studied the whole of the soul's vital powers and functions, both the lower, corporeal, and the higher, mental functions. To this extent, the Aristotelian science of the soul, instead of being a separate discipline, was fully integrated within the broader context of natural philosophy, the science that covered the entire domain of the physical world, from inanimate stones over living beings to winds and stars.

The relation of soul, mind and body only became a salient problem with the identification, by Aristotle's Christian commentators, of the rational soul with the immortal (biblical and very much Platonized) soul. As the latter outlives the body, it must clearly be something different from a set of mere powers and functions. Interestingly, Aristotle himself, who repeatedly treated the intellect as if it were an independent entity, seemed to warrant this identification of the rational soul with the immortal soul. It can in fact be documented that the direct forerunners of Cartesian dualism, to which many contemporary philosophers of mind still react, are to be found in the medieval and Renaissance commentary tradition on Aristotle's treatise on the soul (*De anima*). Some early medieval authors, who were largely influenced by the dualistic doctrines of Avicenna and Nemesius of Emesa, already took a first step in the direction of Cartesian dualism. Another step was taken by those thirteenth- and fourteenth-century commentators on *De anima* who transformed the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul's vital powers into a theory of three distinct parts (or indeed of three distinct souls). This distinction between the soul's parts (vegeta-

tive, sensitive and rational) gave rise to questions such as “whether the three parts are really different from the soul itself” and “whether the sensitive and the rational soul are really distinct from one another.” In answering the latter question, some authors of the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth century developed theories which apparently anticipate the early modern separation of the material body from the spiritual mind. Obviously related to these developments is the debate, virulent among medieval and Renaissance commentators on *De anima*, over the place and status of the science of the soul. Depending on how one conceived the soul/mind–body relation, one could either continue, in an Aristotelian vein, to think about the science of the soul as a part of natural philosophy, or to conceive of it either as a part of metaphysics (or even theology) or as a “middle science” (*scientia media*) between natural philosophy and metaphysics.

In the course of the seventeenth century, some of these older tendencies were radicalized. The most famous—though by no means the only—proposal was put forth by René Descartes, who separated soul/mind and body in an unheard-of manner, by attributing each to different and mutually exclusive substances. The body, viewed as a system of machine-like interactions, was defined as an extended, non-thinking substance (*res extensa*), and the immortal soul/mind as a non-extended, thinking substance (*res cogitans*). No wonder that the famous English philosopher Gilbert Ryle characterized Descartes’ dualist conception as the “dogma of the ghost in the machine.” But from the seventeenth century to our own, it has been clear that this dualist model of the soul/mind–body relation is highly problematic. For one, it cannot adequately explain the union and causal interaction between the two completely different entities: how can immaterial thoughts be about material things, and how can body be the seat of thought? This increasing separation of soul/mind from body was accompanied by the disconnection of the science of the soul from the whole of natural philosophy. At first, the science of the soul or “psychology” — the latter term was introduced in Germany in the later sixteenth century — developed into the philosophical discipline now known as epistemology: the discipline that concerns the forms, nature, and preconditions of human knowledge. Natural philosophy, in turn, was transformed into a mechanistic science of nature. Just like the radical separation of mind from body, this disconnection of epistemology and a study of physical nature, mechanically

conceived, turned the interaction between man's mental and physical states (as well as man's position vis-à-vis other living organisms — plants and animals) into a great problem. It is one of the challenges of this research program to trace in detail the historical development of this seventeenth-century problematic.

Given this background, the aim of the proposed program is to study the diverse pre-modern transformations of the Aristotelian model of the soul/mind–body relation and the emergence of alternative (modern) conceptions. The range of the study, 1250 to 1700, covers the introduction of Aristotle's works into the nascent universities, on the one hand, and the disappearance of a university-based, Latinate and essentially Aristotelian scientific tradition, on the other. The program concentrates primarily — though not exclusively — on the commentary literature on Aristotle's *De anima*. Since *De anima* was part of the university curriculum all over Europe, commentators had to come to grips with Aristotle's theory of the soul. They usually did so by raising increasingly standardized questions in connection with Aristotle's text. Within the tradition of *De anima* commentaries, questions on the relation between soul, mind and body, and on the connection or distinction between the soul's different parts or functions, occupy a prominent place. Some of the questions that were discussed throughout the *De anima* commentary tradition were: “whether every soul is the form of the body;” “whether the intellect is a form inhering in the body;” “whether in human beings the vegetative, the sensitive and the intellectual souls are one and the same;” “whether the intellect uses a bodily organ” and “whether the entire soul is both in the body as a whole and in every single part of it.” By studying the various answers given to such questions, from the mid-thirteenth to the late seventeenth century, it will become clear how the Aristotelian conception of the soul/mind–body relation fragmented into a series of rivalling models, some of which led in the direction of modern dualism. The different elements and motive forces involved in this process of fragmentation, transformation and substitution will be made visible, especially (Neo-) Platonic, Stoic and sceptical elements, humanist influences, theological motives such as the concern about the soul's immortality, and elements from the medical tradition.

In addition to this primary focus on questions concerning the soul/mind–body relation, attention is given to methodological debates about the place and status of the science of the soul. These debates, which also have a prominent place within the *De anima* commentary literature, concern first of all the *object* of the science of the soul. What does it actually study: the soul itself, its powers (or effects), or the animated body? A second question bears upon the *method* of psychology: given the fact that the soul itself is not directly accessible to our senses, how is it possible to make inferences about it? More specifically, is it possible to acquire any reliable knowledge about the soul through the mediation of its external effects? A third question concerns the *position* of the science of the soul within the system of the sciences: is it a part of natural philosophy or does it have a different (independent) status? It can be documented that such methodological discussions directly reflect the debates over the soul/mind’s relation to the body. As a rule, it seems to be the case that a strong emphasis on the mutual dependence of soul and body — the “physicalist” view — coincided with a view of psychology as a natural, physical discipline. Conversely, the loosening of the ties between soul and body tended to be accompanied by a stronger separation of the science of the soul from that of physical reality. The research program will unravel the different elements ([Neo-] Platonic, Stoic, sceptical, humanist, theological and medical) involved both in the soul/mind–body debate and in the methodological discussions over the place and status of the science of the soul.

The research program consists of three projects. All three projects study, chiefly within the commentary tradition on Aristotle’s *De anima*, the discussions over the soul/mind–body relation and the methodological debates over the place and status of the science of the soul. Project 1 covers the medieval period, focussing on Oxford and Paris, the two principal intellectual centers of the Middle Ages. Project 2 concentrates on the universities of Northern Italy, especially Bologna, Florence-Pisa and Padua, during the Renaissance. From the perspective of the present research program, the Northern Italian universities are of particular interest because of the close connection between philosophy and medicine (combined with the absence, in Padua, of a theological faculty) and the intensity of the “Averroist” debates that reverberated all over Europe. Given the fact that project 3 extends well into the seventeenth cen-

tury, a geographical approach is less suited. Early modern philosophy was less determined by local institutional factors (universities in particular) than the Aristotelian tradition had been. For this reason, project 3 isolates one specific topic that was of crucial importance to the debates on soul, mind and body, namely the problem of mental attention.

Project 1: The Study of Soul, Mind and Body 1 — Oxford and Paris (1250–1400)

Project 1, carried out by Sander W. de Boer (BEng, MA), takes as its point of departure the mid-thirteenth century, when Aristotle's writings, including *De anima*, were introduced into the *artes-curricula* of the universities of Oxford and Paris. It stops around the end of the fourteenth century, where project 2 takes over. One of the key topics in this project will be the various tensions between a more metaphysical and a more natural philosophical perspective on the soul, both of which are present in the commentaries on the *De anima*. The former (dominant) perspective tends to focus on the complete living being as a unity, in which the soul as substantial form accounts for this unity, whereas the latter tries to give an explanation of the more dynamic aspects such as the genesis of the organism. Project 1 takes into account both published and unpublished (i. e., manuscript) sources. An important factor involved in project 1 is the impact of theological conceptions of the soul/mind–body relation on the *De anima* commentary literature. For this reason, project 1 pays, where necessary, also some attention to works from outside the *De anima* commentary tradition, such as theological *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* and treatises on the unity and plurality of substantial form(s).

Project 2: The Study of Soul, Mind and Body 2 — The Case of Northern Italy (1400–1600)

Project 2, carried out by Dr Paul J.J.M. Bakker, takes as its point of departure some late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian commentaries on *De anima*, particularly those written by Blasius of Parma, Paul of Venice and Gaetano da Thiene. These authors all occupied an important place in the process of transmission of fourteenth-century Oxford and Paris thought to the Italian universities of the Renaissance. They therefore constitute the nexus between project 1 and project 2. The latter concludes with an analysis of some

late sixteenth-century *De anima* commentaries, especially those written by Jacopo Zabarella and Francesco Piccolomini. One of the specific elements involved in project 2 is the impact of the humanists' enterprise on the *De anima* commentary literature. A major aspect of this humanist influence was the production of new, Latin translations of Aristotle's text, and the translation and dissemination of several newly discovered ancient Greek commentaries. Another very important aspect of humanist influence consists in their contribution to the debates over the methodology of the sciences and the relationship between method as a pedagogical tool and method as a process of acquiring knowledge. A second phenomenon that project 2 needs to evaluate is the impact of the rediscovery of some of Plato's dialogues and of some Neoplatonic writings on the commentary tradition on *De anima*. The final dimension that needs to be taken into account is the relationship between philosophy and theology, in particular the impact of the well-known controversy over the soul's immortality (Pietro Pomponazzi and the Fifth Lateran Council of 1512–1517).

Project 3: The Study of Soul, Mind and Body 3 — The Problem of Mental Attention (1450–1700)

Project 3, carried out by Dr Cees Leijenhorst, takes its point of departure in the second half of the fifteenth century, concentrating, insofar as the Renaissance is concerned, on the two main geographical areas left aside in project 2, namely France and the German countries. It continues through to the end of the seventeenth century, focussing on the non-Aristotelian, modern theories of Descartes, Hobbes, Gassendi and Leibniz, on their Aristotelian backgrounds and on the various reactions these theories provoked. The project explores the ways in which the mental attention debate sheds light on the general problematic of the soul/mind–body relation and on the methodological discussion over the place and status of psychology. The various models of explaining the phenomenon of attention are clearly connected with specific conceptions of the soul/mind–body relation. For instance, one popular account speaks of attention in terms of an active searchlight, which would imply that the soul has a proper activity. This, in turn, seems to entail a certain independence of the soul vis-à-vis the body. Alternatively, a conception of attention in terms of a photographic plate that passively registers external stimuli with their

various strengths seems to go hand in hand with a “physicalist” account of the soul/mind–body union. From this perspective, the problem of mental attention promises to be an excellent, very specific angle from which one can tackle the otherwise overwhelming amount of very divergent material on the soul/mind–body relation in the Renaissance and the early modern period.